

168. * *Fuligula rufina* (Pall.).

T. & B. p. 152.

Shasi market, 30 January, 1918 (two).

169. * *Fuligula baeri* Radde.

Shasi market, 25 February, 1918 (one).

170. * *Fuligula ferruginea* Gm.

Shasi market, 25 February, 1918 (two or three).

171. *Fuligula cristata* (L.).

T. & B. p. 152.

Shasi market, 25 February, 1918 (three).

172. *Mergus merganser* L.

T. & B. p. 152.

Shasi. Abundant in winter.

173. *Podiceps minor philippensis* (Bonnat.).

Tachybaptus ruficollis poggei T. & B. p. 146.

Shasi. Common on ponds and on river in winter.

XXVII.—*The Arabian Ostrich.*

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THE interesting note in the 'Field' of 22 April last to the effect that eggs of the Arabian Ostrich had been recently safely brought, by air and sea, in 30 days from the nest in northern Arabia to London, and had been placed in an incubator in the Zoological Gardens, tempts me to send you some notes of my own, collected over many years, on this interesting and little-known species.

First of all as to the actual locality whence these eggs were obtained by the Sulubbi hunter and brought in to Ramadi. "Three hundred miles from Baghdad, roughly half-way between Baghdad and Jerusalem," brings one to the very centre of the southern Syrian Desert, in the neighbourhood of Jebel Anaza. This is a region we know little or nothing about. Musil, the Austrian explorer, is the only European who has been across it (in 1909), although Leachman in 1912 skirted its eastern flank. It is therefore

quite possible that the Ostrich still exists as far north as this; for although in old days it ranged right up to the Euphrates, it has not been seen in the true Syrian desert for over a century. On the other hand the locality is somewhat unlikely. It is of high altitude—over the 3000-ft. contour line,—a hard arid steppe, with a large area of volcanic (Harra) tract and practically without sand. But the fact that the region is uninhabited—even for a desert,—being seldom visited by nomad graziers, may outbalance this, and allow the district to be a safe refuge for such desired game; in Bedouin life an Ostrich hunt is looked upon as quite as lucrative a venture as a successful raid. If “half-way between Baghdad and Jerusalem” was the Sulubbi’s description of where he found the eggs, it may not have been in the southern Hammad at all, but on the edge of the Nafud sand-bed, which is well known as being the stronghold of the Ostrich in northern Arabia. The north-eastern edge of the Nafud is actually 330 miles from Baghdad, while the oasis of Jauf, which marks the locality, is generally considered the half-way house between Irak and Syria or Palestine. Nearly all Arabian travellers in that region have mentioned the Ostrich, the last being the late Capt. Shakespear, C.I.E., who had an Ostrich chick brought to him on 24 April, 1914, at his camp on the northern edge of the Nafud, two marches east of Jauf. Probably the very best locality for Ostriches (in northern Arabia) is the north-western Nafud, between Jauf and the Hejaz railway, including the Basaita plain and the Tubaik hills. This region is very little visited by Bedouins. It is practically waterless, and except for the “Samh” plant, is without much pasture. The Basaita plain has a reputation for exceeding flatness (in a country where there is not much relief). There is absolutely no cover. Southwards the Nafud grants ample pasture and a permanent and safe retreat, being an area of over 35,000 square miles of sand-dunes.

Northwards the Ostrich ranges into the black-stone plain—the Ardh-es-Suwan, where I saw three in the Wadi Hedrij on 9 February, 1909. This locality is probably their most northern limit towards Palestine at the present day, although

they may have ranged right up to the frontiers of Moab within living memory. Tristram claimed to possess a skin which had been obtained in the Belka—the desert frontier of Trans-Jordania.

Westwards the Ostrich extends to the Hejaz railway. In Tebuk I saw a skin for sale, and in the Wadi Akhdar I saw tracks. We also know of it from Doughty, who in 1877 saw “fresh footprints” on the northern edge of the Kheibar (volcanic) Harra. He says “it descends into the plain of Medain Saleh; I have seen her footing in Ethlib,” which is a hill in the Hejr plain. Further, while sojourning in the castle at Medain Saleh, hunters brought in eggs which he ate as “a well-tasting omelette”; while an Heteym hunter of his acquaintance made his annual income by obtaining two skins against the arrival of the Mecca pilgrims. These he sold for 40 to 45 reals each (Maria Theresa crowns). This same hunter once caught two chicks, which grew up in the courtyard of the castle. The Hejaz railway has doubtless expelled the Ostrich from its immediate neighbourhood.

Central Arabia, Nejd proper, is probably not inhabited by the Ostrich. It has never been recorded, although in certain portions there is no reason why it should not exist. Nor has it been reported from the Persian Gulf side, the Hasa and Oman coasts. But we know it occurs on the borders of the great southern wilderness—the Ruba el Khali.

Great interest lies in the present-day conscribed range of the Arabian Ostrich as contrasting with its wide habitat in comparatively recent times. It may well have been named “syracus” in those days, for it roamed over the whole Syrian desert, right up to the banks of the Euphrates. Nowadays the Ostrich is purely Arabian, for it is generally accepted that the undefined boundary between Arabia proper and Syria is the 30th parallel of latitude. The desert triangle north of this line, which extends right up to Aleppo and is bounded by the Euphrates on the east and the settled lands of Syria and Palestine on the west, cannot be considered as anything but Syrian, although it is often misnamed Arabian. Over this whole region, which is hard steppe, without any

special feature except small ranges of hills and dry wadi-beds, the Ostrich used to roam. Our knowledge of it depends on reliable witnesses, such as British officers and East India Company officials. By curious chance, this region was better known two centuries ago than it is to-day. For a brief period in the early 18th century the overland Syrian desert route became a favourite one for officers and others in the service of the East India Company, and we have many valuable diaries of journeys accomplished between Aleppo and Basra.

The last record of the Ostrich in the neighbourhood of the Euphrates was in 1797, when Olivier mentions them in the desert west of Rehaba, *i. e.* about 23 miles due south of Deir ez Zor.

In 1789, Major John Taylor, of the "Bombay Establishment," saw "several ostriches and found their eggs lying on the bare ground," 30 December, just south of the Wadi Hauran, half-way between it and the village of Kubaisa (11 miles west of Hit).

In 1781, Eyles Irwin "in the service of the East India Co.," whilst traversing the desert route from Aleppo to Baghdad found a nest (28 March) at a point roughly half-way between Palmyra and the Euphrates, near the watering called Jubb Ghanam.

Ten years earlier, General Sir Eyre Coote saw Ostriches on 24 February two days' east of Palmyra, and he records the cupola of a tomb close to Taiybe (a small village 50 miles north-east of Palmyra) as being adorned with Ostrich's eggs. He also found an egg (*in situ*) in the same locality. This is probably the most northern record of the Ostrich, a latitude corresponding to Malta and Tangier.

In 1750, Bartholomew Plaisted, also of the East India Company, saw on 9 July an Ostrich in the same locality where Taylor had found them—near the mouth of the Wadi Hauran.

As to their existence on the Lower Euphrates, we only have the record of the Portuguese traveller, Pedro Teixeira, who in 1604 found their feathers two days' west of Basra.